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AUTHOR	Florey, Janice; Tafoya, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

A 1982 study revealed that American Indians comprise .8% of public school students, but only .3% of those participating in gifted programs, whereas respective White figures are 73.3% and 82%. Factors contributing to the inappropriateness of standardized assessment tools for identification of gifted American Indian students are neglect of subcultural values, abilities, and knowledge in assessment instruments and procedures; use of exclusive training in application of middle class measurement instruments; belief that object measurement is the only way to conduct assessment; inadequate attention to problems of motivation and negative reactions to the examiner; failure to include sufficient numbers of minority students in standardization calculations; and lack of knowledge about culturally valued talents of American Indian students. Educators must consider whether the child exhibits outstanding powers in one or more abilities valued by the child's culture, measures at a bright average level in national norms in both ability and achievement, demonstrates creativity, and shows leadership potential. Educators must also assess verbal and nonverbal responses, provide adequate time for students to answer, develop questioning procedures to elicit multiple responses on items giving credit for such responses, assess a wide range of abilities, and use a matrix rather than one factor for making decisions. (NEC)

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AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

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IDENTIFYING GIFTED AND TALENTED AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS: AN OVERVIEW

Gifted and talented youngsters exist within any racial group or cultural setting. In this country, however, the processes and instruments for identifying one group, gifted American Indians, are little suited to the task. Giftedness is often defined by tests which reflect Euro-American middle class standards, with virtually no attention being paid to the expectations and values of American Indian culture. But identifying gifted and talented Indians can be achieved, once educators define a broader perspective than is current.

Who are the gifted and talented?

There unfortunately is no set of widely used, standard definitional criteria by which gifted and talented students can be identified; however, many states continue to use the federal definition established by the now repealed Gifted and Talented Children's Act of 1978. The act, known as Public Law 95-561, contains 4 components critical to defining and serving such students. First, it addresses the multidimensional areas of giftedness, which include general intellectual abilities, specific academic aptitude, visual and performing arts, leadership, and creative and productive thinking. Second, P. L. 95-561 calls for a wider age range of children to be served. Third, children who have the potential for giftedness must be considered as well, and, finally, those identified as gifted or potentially gifted need differentiated educational services.

Although not all states use the federal definition set forth by P. L. 95-561, a study by the Council for Exceptional Children for the U. S. Office of Education reported that 39 states have legislation which mentions or defines gifted and talented children (Zettel, 1980). These states generally define giftedness in terms of intellectual ability, but 75 percent also consider creativity, 67 percent include leadership, and 67 percent focus on artistic talent.

How are the gifted identified?

Procedures for admitting children to gifted programs generally follow 4 basic steps: (1) referral, (2) assessment, (3) selection, and (4) placement. Referrals are based upon teacher judgment, parent nominations, grades, group test scores, or any combination of these. Assessment involves determining the referred child's level of abilities on a battery of tests, which generally include measures of intelligence, achievement, and/or problem solving. Selection occurs only after the referred child has been assessed as potentially gifted and his or her ability levels specifically determined. A decision on placement is made based on this information, the needs of the child, and the program options available.

Why are American Indian children disproportionately identified as gifted and talented?

Although talented and gifted students are found in all racial, cultural, social, and economic segments of society, there are "factors that tend to veil the talent potential of gifted groups, hindering true readings and proper identification" (Khatena, 1982, p. 238). Thus, American Indian students are underrepresented in gifted classrooms. In fact, one 1982 study by the U. S. Department of Education revealed that American Indians comprise .8 percent of public school students,

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but only .3 percent of those participating in gifted programs, whereas the respective white figures are 73.3 and 82 percent.

Mitchell (1984) has reported that most states select gifted and talented students through multiple criteria. However, many school districts still use intelligence tests as the primary identifier, with cutoffs ranging from 1.5 to 2.0 standard deviations above the norm. The measurement instruments draw heavily on one racial and/or dominant economic group against which they have been normed and standardized.

The use of standardized instruments to identify culturally diverse children is inappropriate. Such measures have a frame of reference that is uniquely white middle class in terms of test items and group norms. Generally speaking, culturally diverse groups do not perform well on such instruments. One example is the widespread use of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Revised Edition (WISC-R). The verbal section of the WISC-R is biased against American Indian language systems, which rely on nonverbal communication, use of undetailed verbal accounts, noncompetitiveness, soft speech patterns, and mythology rather than science (Florey, 1986; Connelly, 1985). These characteristics give the appearance that American Indians have a weakness in understanding oral language and lead to an underestimation of their actual language ability.

Efforts to correct for assessment biases in verbal language tests have been made by using measures that are more performance oriented. In 1984, the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (K-ABC) began to be used as a more culturally fair assessment device than the WISC-R or the Stanford Binet, because it relies heavily on nonverbal skills and keys on information processing rather than pure information (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983). The performance section of the K-ABC contains subtests involving block design, object assembly, and coding. These are more fair for American Indians, who work well with symbolic and visual images. Nevertheless, timed tasks that require rapid, organized thought are incongruent with the Indian concept of a continuous present.

American Indian values which encourage interdependence, collective decisionmaking, and group cohesiveness are not utilized by current assessment instruments. Intelligence and achievement measures analyze individual performance without reference to the group process. Moreover, the form of test administration--where students cannot communicate--and the emphasis placed on performance scores encourage competition between individuals.

Many factors contribute to the inappropriateness of assessment practices for American Indians. Bruch and Curry (1978, cited in Masten, 1981) list the following:

- -neglect of subcultural values, abilities, and knowlege in assessment instruments and procedures;
- -use of exclusive training in application of middle class measurement instruments;
- -belief that object measurement is the only way to conduct assessment;
- -inadequate attention to problems of motivation and negative reactions to the examiner;
- -failure to include sufficient numbers of minority students in standardization calculations; and
- -lack of knowledge about talents of non-mainstream students.

What are some alternative methods for identification?

Clearly, changes for identifying American Indian gifted and talented students must be implemented. Most recently, multiple criteria identification approaches have been employed where qualitative and quantitative measures are permissible within state or school district guidelines (Frasier, 1984). This approach allows the school community greater flexibility in seeking out the culturally diverse and permits the identification process to extend beyond

traditional individual intelligence tests.

Qualitative and quantitative data should be gathered during the assessment and screening phase. The data should address abilities in the cognitive, creative, and affective realms and be matched to the district's gifted and talented criteria. In turn, the selection criteria should match the type of gifted and/or talented program that is being implemented. Qualitative data include anecdotal records, observations of students, behavior rating scales, parent/peer/self ratings and recommendations, and information from cumulative files. Quantitative data include psychometric measurement results from intelligence, achievement, or problem solving instruments as well as class grades.

All data should then be placed on a student data sheet, listing test instruments with composite and subtest scores. A graphic depiction should be provided so that a visual profile of the data is available. An identification team can use the profile to evaluate a student's strengths and weaknesses.

This method is similar to the matrix approach. Here, after deriving a total score from a variety of assessment data, a cutoff criterion can be established for the total score or students can be ranked according to that total. Then, a selected percentage can be designated as eligible for entry into the gifted and talented program. The matrix approach, like the multiple criteria approach, provides several sources of information and a profile of strengths and weaknesses. A major advantage of the matrix approach is that it permits the inclusion of students based on their rankings in different areas relative to other students, instead of relying on one inclusive I. Q. score (Kitano & Kirby, 1986).

There are several vital considerations when attempting to identify American Indian students as gifted. Bruch (1970, cited in Faas, 1982) contends educators must consider whether the child:

-exhibits outstanding powers in one or more abilities valued by the child's culture,

-measures at a bright average level in national norms in both ability and achievement, and

-shows leadership potential.

Such educators must also:

-assess verbal and nonverbal responses,

-provide adequate time for students to answer,

-develop questioning procedures to elicit multiple responses on items giving credit for such responses,

-assess a wide range of abilities, and

-use a matrix rather than on factor for making decisions.

What is the role of the school community in the identification of American Indian gifted students?

Both the multiple criteria and matrix approaches make strong efforts to involve the school community in the identification process. Further involvement through participation in screening committees, in-service training in nomination and identification procedures, and involvement in development of gifted programs suited for the specific population encourages ongoing participation in the identification process. Classroom teachers, principals, school counselors, and instructional aides should participate as members of an inter-disciplinary team that evaluates and makes recommendations regarding the child's needs.

Inservice programs should offer participants information on values, customs, family influences, learning styles, thinking processes, and how these factors relate to the school environment and the academic performance of the child. Any identification of American Indian children should be sensitive to the conflicts engendered by the desire to maintain traditional beliefs, customs, and language (Perrone & Aleman, 1983). Parents should not be excluded from their role in contributing to the

identification of gifted students. Parent participation may, however, require special outreach efforts.

Educators must keep in mind that differences between tribal groups make it difficult to generalize about American Indians. Yet, efforts must be made to seek out more gifted and talented students regardless of these differences, for in the incredible variety of perception and talent giftedness grows and awaits recognition.

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Prepared by:

Janice Florey
Teacher of the Academically
Program Talented
Douglas County School District
Minden, NV

Nancy Tafoya
Advanced Educational Facilitator
Las Cruces Public Schools
Las Cruces, NM

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For further information contact: ERIC/CRESS, Dept. 3AP, Box 30001, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, N.M. 88003-0001 (505) 646-2623

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BY

JANICE FLOREY

AND

NANCY TAFOYA

MARCH 1988

ERIC® CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION and SMALL SCHOOLS

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